

# Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide: A Linguistic Turn

*Moshe Idel*

## **Jewish Philosophy and Kabbala in Modern Scholarship**

The main purpose of this study is to elucidate some aspects of the relationship between certain writings of a mystic, Abraham Abulafia, the founder of ecstatic kabbala, and the medieval figure he admired most, Maimonides, the major founder of Jewish Aristotelianism. This issue is to be understood as part of a much broader topic, one which is fundamental for the understanding of the Jewish speculative corpora in the Middle Ages: the relation between philosophy and mysticism. As seen below, this issue has been already adumbrated by several scholars, one of the most eminent among them being Alexander Altmann. Therefore, before dwelling upon details of the particular question I shall briefly survey the state of the field.

The relationship between philosophy and mysticism in Judaism has been discussed several times by many scholars and thinkers. Two of them, David Neumark<sup>1</sup> and Franz Rosenzweig,<sup>2</sup> proposed a theory which may be designated as the "pendulum theory". Its basic assumption is the existence of oscillations between the dominance of the speculative and the mystical in Jewish thought. The emergence of the central trend in medieval Jewish mysticism, kabbala, is portrayed by them as a reaction to the ascent of Jewish philosophy in the form presented by Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. These authors assumed that the fluctuation between speculation and mysticism is to be traced to ancient times, the medieval period being

the most obvious and important episode of this ongoing oscillation. Motivated by a deep aversion toward kabbala, Heinrich Graetz, the most important 19th century Jewish historian, had already considered it a pernicious medieval innovation, or invention, aimed at counteracting the influence of the “enlightening” Aristotelianism of the “Great Eagle”.<sup>3</sup>

Last but not least, Gershom Scholem emphasized the importance of the encounter between an alleged mythical Gnosticism, presumably transmitted in Jewish esoteric circles for centuries on the one hand, and the philosophical Neoplatonism represented by various medieval versions on the other hand, as his main phenomenological explanation for the emergence of kabbala.<sup>4</sup> Though Scholem did not ignore the potential impact of the controversy concerning Maimonides’ writings on the early kabbalists, he was inclined to regard it as a secondary factor; he indeed observed the affinity between the opponents of the Jewish philosopher and those who were mystically biased.<sup>5</sup>

Jewish philosophy and kabbala however, have more often been regarded by some medieval thinkers and modern scholars as considerably distinct speculative trends, a view with which I agree. If not always opposing each other, or competing for impact on the souls and minds of the **intelligentsia**, they were portrayed as essentially diverse types of spirituality. Roughly speaking, this seems to me to be true, but only if we address the extreme forms of kabbala and philosophy. However, a perusal of Julius Guttman’s *Philosophies of Judaism*, and Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* will put this dichotomy in medieval Jewish speculation in a rather sharper relief. The two **summae** of long years of research by the two great scholars who had established the Jerusalem standard of research in their respective fields, are not inclined to offer more synthetic surveys of the whole field of Jewish thought, and then locate their own specific area of research. Jewish mysticism is marginalized in Guttman’s *Philosophies of Judaism*, while Jewish philosophy is only rarely treated in details in Scholem’s *Major Trends*. A perusal of the extensive corpus of H.A. Wolfson, another colossus of the study of Jewish philosophy, reveals the same marginalization of kabbala, by a major historian of Jewish thought.

However, this initial strong demarcation of areas did not remain so influential in the subsequent scholarship of Jewish thought. Other scholars, belonging to the next generation, the most important among them being the late Professors Alexander Altmann, Georges Vajda and — later on in their writings — also Shlomo Pines, Joseph B. Sermoneta on the one hand, and

Isadore Twersky, Colette Sirat and S.O. Heller Wilensky on the other, were less disposed toward strong dichotomies.<sup>6</sup> Especially important from our point of view is the concept of ‘rational mysticism’ which recurs in scholarship more often in recent decades, under the impact of some of the aforementioned scholars, particularly Georges Vajda; and the recurring attempts of scholars, in both the history of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, to highlight the more mystical implications of those forms of thought.<sup>7</sup>

A medieval example of an effort to bridge the gap between the two domains of speculation is the attempt of some circles of kabbalists to draw Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* to the side of the mystics.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, there were a few kabbalists, who claimed that kabbala is the inner philosophy.<sup>9</sup> More recently, more mystical readings of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* have been proposed by some scholars,<sup>10</sup> while the wide range of the philosophical sources and speculative interpretations of kabbalistic types of thought, have received more and more attention in scholarship.<sup>11</sup>

A crucial phase in the substantial encounter between philosophy and mysticism in Judaism occurs in the middle of the 13th century in Spain. Some figures who constitute the innovative kabbala, like Joseph Gikatilla and Abraham Abulafia and, to a lesser degree, Isaac ben Abraham ibn Latif,<sup>12</sup> Moses de Leon, to a certain extent David ben Abraham ha-Lavan, and the anonymous author of the ecstatic treatise named *Sha’arei Zedeq*, moved from a philosophical stage, represented by a study of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, to different forms of kabbala.<sup>13</sup> Though being kabbalists, some of them nevertheless regarded the *Guide* as an important source which has to be understood in a more profound manner by means of kabbalistic concepts and exegetical devices. The writings of all these kabbalists — with the important exceptions of R. Moses de Leon whose metamorphosis was much more radical than that of the others, and R. David ha-Lavan — can serve as an important field of research in the philosophico-mystical zone. The name of their game is super-arcanaization, namely, offering a secret reading of an already esoteric treatise, Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.

The question of the stand of the Great Eagle himself in relation to mysticism was treated already in the middle thirties: Gershom Scholem discussed the spurious attribution of mystical and quasi-mystical traditions and writings to Maimonides by kabbalists.<sup>14</sup> Another important contribution to this topic is that of the late Prof. Alexander Altmann, who carefully analysed the different approaches in crucial matters of religion as ad-

vanced by Maimonides and some kabbalists.<sup>15</sup> Altmann resorted in this context to Abraham Abulafia's commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*, and the present study is an attempt to offer a closer look at some of the questions related to Abulafia's attempt to read the *Guide*.<sup>16</sup> In the following, three moves which distinguish Abulafia's approach from that of Maimonides', and are present in the former's commentaries of the *Guide*, will be surveyed: Abulafia's emphasis on imminent salvation, his unitive-philosophical concepts, and the role of language and linguistic issues in his system. Though a superficial understanding of the nature of the three moves may assume that they represent unrelated topics they are, in Abulafia's writings, intertwined matters. By analyzing the processes of Kabbalistic arcanization of the *Guide* I hope to show once again that the boundaries between philosophy and mysticism are not clear-cut in Judaism but are as vague as in other forms of religion. In order to exemplify this statement, an analysis of some of the positions of Abraham Abulafia, especially as expressed in his commentaries on the *Guide*, will be undertaken. The main aim of the following discussion is to point to the manner in which Abulafia deviated from Maimonides' views.

### Secrets: From Restoration to Imminent Salvation

Maimonides argued that Jewish esotericism as described in his writings, old as it might have been in itself, is a matter of his own reconstruction.<sup>17</sup> This restoration is required because of the loss of those secrets, caused by the vicissitudes of the exile. Maimonides assumes that he can restore the broken line of transmission of the secrets of the Torah, and recreate thereby a pre-existing ideal situation. Maimonides does not offer any details as to what precisely has been the method of this retrieval, if this is a matter of his reading attentively the biblical texts, or of being inspired by rabbinic hints on esoteric topics. In any case, this project can hardly be described as an eschatological one, at least from the historical point of view. If personal eschatological implications are discerned in his project, it is a result of the attitude of scholars. Maimonides' treatise is basically a past-oriented book, an archeological endeavour intended, by the explicit confession of its author, to guide the present perplexed ones out of the spiritual perplexity caused by the loss of secrets, which amounts to a misunderstanding of the scriptures. Indeed, someone may wonder if, according to Maimonides, the restoration of the secret tradition is possible in the exile or, alternatively, if the restoration of the secret tradition is symptomatic of a hidden eschato-

logical dimension, imminent in the historical moment Maimonides lived. By and large, Maimonides' project in the *Guide* is an exegetical one, with important repercussions for his contemporaries' attitude to Judaism. They could find in it an interesting religious outlook, especially the Jewish **intelligentsia** who were exposed to non-Jewish forms of theology and philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

According to other traditions, however, secrets of the Torah will be revealed only by the Messiah.<sup>19</sup> For some thinkers, this means a postponement of the revelation of these secrets to an indefinite future. Abraham Abulafia's interpretation of the secrets of the Torah takes place, according to his special awareness, under the aegis of *imminent redemption*, both personal and national. He himself is his own Messiah and the Messiah of the nation; in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* he indicates that he reveals secrets because of the imminence of redemption.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, his revelation of the secrets is facilitated by the feeling that the national eschaton is close, a matter a few years.<sup>21</sup> The very revelation of the secrets was conceived as helping the mystic to reach a mystical experience of conspicuous salvific character on the personal plane. "Secrets of the Torah" are intended to help the reader attain a redemptive experience. The first of Abulafia's commentaries to the *Guide* is named *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, in its Latin translation *Liber Redemptionis*,<sup>22</sup> while in another commentary, Abulafia asserts that the thirty-six secrets of the *Guide* are

"all the secrets to which he will pay attention to understand, by [concentrated] speculation, and to understand their intention and 'he will be redeemed'"<sup>23, 24</sup>

The verse in Hebrew, *Ge'ulah tiheyeh lo*, has been understood by Abulafia in his particular way: redemption will be attained by means of the thirty-six secrets hinted at by the word *lo*, (thirty six in gematria). Here, the nexus between secrets and redemption is explicit. A similar view can be found also in the first commentary, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, where he identifies the "life of the soul" with the "life of the next world", both meaning *hassagah*, "comprehension".<sup>25</sup> This view occurs also in his second commentary, *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*,<sup>26</sup> and it should be understood in a non-eschatological framework: the next world is not the realm of existence after death, but the ecstatic experience while in this world. We learn this also from one of his most important books: *The Life of the Next World*. We witness here an important instance of spiritualisation of traditional eschatological terminol-

ogy, interpreted in terms of imminent individual salvation, a phenomenon well-known in the history of mysticism.<sup>27</sup> In this context, another observation of Abulafia's may be quite relevant. As we shall see below, he indicates that the number of the chapters of the *Guide* are 177, a number that is equivalent to the numerical value of *Gan 'Eden, Paradise*.<sup>28</sup> It is less the need to attenuate the pernicious effects of the external exile, as Maimonides' reconstruction aspires to do, and much more the attempt to obliterate the inner exile, that is the main concern of Abulafian soteriology. In fact, the two approaches are not to be seen as drastically different but, at least insofar as Abulafia's views are concerned, as building upon the attainment of Maimonides. The philosopher has provided the framework, a political *Weltbild*, a philosophy of nature and a neoaristotelian metaphysics punctuated by some Platonic positions, and a psychology. These serve as starting points for an intensification of the religious life, which culminate in a mystical experience.

### From Philosophical Noetics To Mystical Experience

Maimonides was a conservative thinker, if we recall his view of the human intellect as hardly attaining a certain firm knowledge of God; and his view of language as a conventional entity, and as such a weak instrument of knowing God or nature. The more modest characterizations of the powers of language and intellect are consonant with Maimonides' general search for the golden mean. The golden mean also implies, however, the negation of an extreme religious, or philosophical, attainment. The awareness of the limitations of the human intellect, consonant with the view of a sober philosopher, can be understood, as the late Prof. S. Pines proposed, as a pessimistic, almost tragic vision of the thinking man.<sup>29</sup> The effort to push God beyond the range, though not beyond the scope, of human understanding in order to safeguard His utmost purity and spirituality, demanded a price in the realm of epistemology: the human intellect, connected as it is with matter, cannot experience the divine nature, though He is purely intellectual. It is only in the moment of death that the few elite, Moses and the patriarchs, were able to attain the kiss of bliss, i.e., an experience of God.<sup>30</sup> Transcendence has its sublime moments, for which the philosopher often pays in the cash of a very modest noetic attainment of the absolute intellectual realm. Thus the divine unitive experiences were not conceived as possible in his system, and it may well be that Maimonides was deliberately reticent toward the Neo-

platonian views on the cleaving of the soul to God, or the Averroean unitive noetics.<sup>31</sup>

Abulafia, however, assumes that the "death by kiss" of the patriarchs, an experience in hoary antiquity, should be seen in a much more exemplary and relevant manner. He asserts that

"whomever's soul will be separated from him at the time of pronouncing [the divine name] will die by a kiss."<sup>32</sup>

The prerogative of the few perfecti in the past, according to the view of Maimonides, turned into the immediate achievement of the extreme mystics, available in the present.<sup>33</sup> Abulafia also assumes the human intellect can become one entity with the divine mind, an experience that could be designated as mystical union. In my opinion this development in Abulafia's thought, in comparison with Maimonides' view, can be explained both by acquaintance with Averroean views concerning the possibility of the union between the human and the cosmic intellect, which had been accepted by his teacher in matters of philosophy, Rabbi Hillel of Verona,<sup>34</sup> and by the mystical experiences Abulafia apparently underwent, which had been understood as pointing to union with God. So, for example, he argues in one of his commentaries on the *Guide* that the actualization of one's intellect will transform it into the entity that caused this process, namely the Agent Intellect, and that the two will become "one inseparable entity during the time of that act."<sup>35</sup> In this vein the perfect mystic is described as follows:

"just as his Master<sup>36</sup> who is detached from all matter is called the Knowledge, the Knowér and the Known, all at the same time, since all the three are one in Him, so shall he, the exalted man, the master of the exalted Name, be called intellect, while he is actually knowing; then he is also 'the known' like his Master, and then there is no difference between them, except that his Master has His supreme rank by His own right and not derived from other creatures, while he is elevated to his rank by the mediation of the creatures."<sup>37</sup>

This hyperevaluation of the intellect is coupled, as we shall see below, by a simultaneous hyperevaluation of speech; language is both a domain of contemplation, higher than nature, and a technique for attaining a mystical experience which has noetic features. In other words, the overactivation of the intellect and its merging with God is achieved by an overactivation of language, utilized as a component in a mystical technique. The two extremes meet, and both are characteristic of Abulafia's

strong propensity for actualization of some of Maimonides' spiritual ideals of the past. This view is expressed at the very beginning of *Sitrei Torah* where Abulafia characterises the *Guide* as "concerned with the explanation of homologies and the interpretation of prophetic parables." His own commentary is intended to deal with

"religious wisdom, namely the interpretation of the rationale for the life of the rational soul,<sup>38</sup> and the interpretation of the worship of God through love. Even if the subject of each of them [the two books] is unique in itself, everything goes to the same place."<sup>39</sup>

In lieu of Maimonides' hermeneutical project, which is focused on natural and metaphysical frameworks, Abulafia proposes a spiritual interpretation of the Bible, pointing not only to the true meaning of the Bible, and the proper theology, but also and more eminently issuing a pressing call for an intense spiritual life. The intensification of this spiritual life for Abulafia involves an ecstatic path conceived as inducing prophetic experiences of messianic status.

### From Lost Secrets to Their Public Transmission

Maimonides' *Guide* is a written document, and the strategies to which the author resorted reflect this choice, as Leo Strauss has pointed out.<sup>40</sup> Maimonides' refusal to meet R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, the translator of his main theological writing, and in many ways the follower of Maimonides, in order to discuss with him the content of his book orally, is characteristic of his decision to pass its secrets only in a written, and thus allusive, form.<sup>41</sup> The secrets he claimed to have reconstructed were not supposed to become an oral tradition, as they were according to rabbinic sources, but remained buried in a written text, perplexing future generations of intellectual Jews.

Kabbalists, however, unlike philosophers, have nevertheless argued that such an oral tradition related to the *Guide* is available. Thus, the concept of oral transmission, which has some support in Jewish esoterics, but had been put aside silently by Maimonides, was invoked by a kabbalist in order to interpret his book. Abulafia taught the *Guide* to some young Jewish intellectuals, and at least one of his commentaries was written, according to Abulafia's claim, at the request of his former students. As a teacher of the *Guide*, Abulafia was conspicuously involved in oral teaching and discussions, which are reflected in a written fashion in the com-

mentaries. Oral transmission of secrets was, for Abulafia, a praxis which was very much part of his activity, however contradicting as it was Maimonides' own explicit interdiction and the kabbalists' esoteric propensity: he taught the *Guide* in Spain, Greece and Italy.<sup>42</sup> His formulations on this matter are much closer to Nahmanides' famous statement in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, concerning the transmission of kabbala.<sup>43</sup> So, for example, Abulafia asserts that

"the secrets of the Torah, and the secrets of reality<sup>44</sup> and the foundations of the commandments, are told only orally, from a perfect person to someone who merits receiving the perfection; face to face, after a test and a trial, [regarding] the intention of the receiver, if he is meritorious and it is right to transmit [them] to him or not."<sup>45</sup>

Abulafia writes, again, in one of his epistles, that

"despite the fact that kabbala is transmitted to every illuminatus in general, not every listener and receiver is able to actualize it, because what it is transmitted of it [namely the kabbala] are but chapter-headings, [intended] to whomever is wise, and has understanding from his own knowledge."<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the Maimonidean esoteric, which seems to be esoteric for at least two main reasons — the rabbinic interdiction to disclose some secrets, as well as for more political reasons, stemming from the Platonic tradition — in ecstatic kabbala one of the main reasons for esotericism is the fact that the recipient must be a philosophically oriented person, in order to be initiated into the secrets of kabbala.

The anonymous kabbalist who authored *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, an ecstatic kabbalist himself, said that

"whatever is transmitted concerning this lore, are chapter-headings', and this is why it needs the intellect. It is called intellectual kabbala<sup>47</sup> because it is not like the other sciences, namely the propaedeutic ones, which are transmitted alone . . . But this lore, known as kabbala, is impossible to transmit in toto in an oral manner, not even in a written form, even for thousands of years. And everything a kabbalist attempts to interpret, is a hint and a 'chapter-heading' only."<sup>48</sup>

This kabbalist, even more than Abulafia, understands kabbala in a more experiential and hermeneutical manner, rendering the experience ineffable and interpretation a never ending enterprise. Transmission of secrets had been prohibited by the ancient Rabbis for reasons that are not so clear and had been reinforced by Maimonides for political reasons. Abulafia was ready

to adopt a much more lenient position on this issue, while the anonymous ecstatic kabbalist quoted above has conceived it as almost impossible in its totality, given both the experiential cargo implied in the practice of this lore and the vagueness of the linguistic material related to transmission. Both the vagueness of the experience and the nature of the text, which cannot be exhausted, necessitate intellectual articulation, and this is why the kabbala, in the way it is presented in oral or written manner, is an intellectual lore. Its linguistic expressions elicit a certain explication. The move from political esotericism to the psychological and hermeneutical problems involved in transmission invites a much greater emphasis on language from the point of view of the kabbalists. While Maimonides assumed that the political secrets could be articulated and therefore transmitted — were such an act advisable — the kabbalists looked for a content more focused upon language itself, not conceiving language only as a necessary, though inferior, communicative tool.

### Language: From Conventional to Natural

Maimonides' view on language, including Hebrew, is that it is a conventional phenomenon. This view has far-reaching repercussions on his view of revelation and Scriptures and has been analyzed by scholars.<sup>49</sup> It is on this issue that sharp critiques of kabbalists were addressed to Maimonides' thought. More evident in some writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla, a student of Abulafia, or in a less conspicuous way by the elevation of Hebrew to the sublime status of a perfect language, in Abulafia's own books Maimonides is not criticised on this point, though his stand was not accepted. Let me start with the more extreme formulations, which are characteristic of the beginning of a retreat from Maimonidean thought in 13th century Castile. In a very striking passage found in a commentary on some topics in the *Guide*, printed as the work of Gikatilla, it is said that

“Regarding all the languages of the world, with the exception of the holy language, there is no purpose in asking reasons for the particular letters of a word, since they are the result of human convention and do not reflect nature, namely they are the result of a nation's decision to call something such and such. Therefore, the words of their languages do not possess an inner structure.<sup>50</sup> With the holy language this is not the case, because it is not a language that people agreed upon, but rather is indeed born of infinite Divine wisdom, and is entirely established in accordance with Divine intent.”<sup>51</sup>

Gikatilla negates the innate nature of other languages, and in contrast sees Hebrew as the Divine language. Elsewhere, when criticising Maimonides' conception of language, he writes:

“But the meaning of [the verse]<sup>52</sup> ‘This is its name’ is that it is its true name, in accordance with Divine wisdom, based on the Supernal Book. For Adam received it all by way of kabbala, and the Holy One Blessed be He informed him of the secret orders of the universe, the secrets of His Chariots, the ways of causality and the hidden potencies behind all orders; and after He had informed him of these he was properly able to call each thing by its true name, in accordance with the Divine intent.”<sup>53</sup>

This tells us that man issued names to phenomena after understanding their true nature, “the secret orders of the universe” and “the ways of causality.” Thus, language is not only a result of revelation but is the true expression of the essence of various phenomena by virtue of what I would propose to call ‘linguistic immanence’.<sup>54</sup> With this view in mind, we may say that the aforementioned quote from *Be'urei ha-Moreh*, “. . . since they are the result of human convention and do not reflect nature,” means that their languages are conventional, as opposed to Hebrew, which is conceived to be a natural language. In another passage, stemming from the circle of Gikatilla, we learn that

“And it is necessary that we believe that the language of the Torah is not a result of convention, as some illustrious rabbis of previous generations had thought. For if one were to say that the language which the Torah employs is a result of convention, as is the case with other languages, we would end up denying the [Divine Revelation] of the Torah, which was in its entirety imparted to us from God. And you already know [regarding the verse]<sup>55</sup> ‘For he desecrated the word of God’, that this refers to one who says that the Torah is conventional, but that the rest is from heaven; our sages have already stated that anyone who says that the entire Torah, save for one word, is of Divine origin, such a person has desecrated the word of God.<sup>56</sup> And if the language of the Torah is in its original form a conventional one, like all other languages, regarding which the Torah states! ‘for there did God confound the language of all the earth,’ (Gen. 11:9) it [Hebrew] would be like all other languages.”<sup>57</sup>

Another kabbalist, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, a younger contemporary of Gikatilla and Abulafia, actually denied that Maimonides held a view of language as conventional. In a passage that is significant from many points of view, he claims

“God forbid that Maimonides intended this. Who has stood up among the *geonim*, who is like him? Rather his words are [to be understood] as chapter headings [*rashei peraqim*] which are understood by someone who has received his secrets orally.”<sup>58</sup>

Here, the kabbalist denies the rather obvious Maimonidean view of the nature of Hebrew language as conventional, in favor of the kabbalistic opinion of its divine origin.<sup>59</sup> Thus, an oral secret tradition is invoked in order to circumvent, or even deny, Maimonides’ authentic opinion.

Some kabbalists were, therefore, well aware of the ultimate implications of the reduction of the sacrosanct language, the portent of many topics of Jewish mysticism, to a merely conventional tongue. They understood that the acceptance of the philosopher’s view on this issue may undermine their spirituality, based upon a linguo-centric mentality, and may endanger their specific form of kabbala as well as the very foundation of the Torah. However, this fear appears in the writings of kabbalists who have already shifted toward a more theosophical mode of thought. Gikatilla was on this path when writing the passage quoted above, while Joseph Ashkenazi was already an accomplished theosophical kabbalist. Abulafia, however, though moving from philosophy to kabbala, never embraced the sefirotic kabbala, but, at least in his later years, he offered some poignant critiques of it.<sup>60</sup>

### Maimonides: Secrets and Linguistic Hermeneutics

Even Abulafia, the most ardent of Maimonides’ admirers among the kabbalists, tacitly dissents from him on this issue.<sup>61</sup> In his case, a very interesting process can be discerned: Maimonides’ attempt to reduce the importance of language in favor of a much more mentalistic approach is ignored by the ecstatic kabbalist, who resorts precisely to linguistic devices in order to achieve the very aims he thought Maimonides preached. The synthesis Abulafia offers is almost an attempt to reconcile opposites; the elements in Jewish tradition ignored by Maimonides, like *Sefer Yetzirah* for example, become cornerstones for his interpretations of the *Guide*. Or, to put it in another way: for Maimonides, language has a communicative function, but can serve neither as a domain of contemplation nor as a catalyst for intellection. These two functions are precisely those which are emphasized by Abulafia. According to his view, language is higher than nature and can therefore substitute for philosophical contemplation of nature.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, language, more precisely Hebrew, serves as an integral

part of the technique of bringing someone to a mystical experience.<sup>63</sup> This emphasis upon the paramount importance of Hebrew is well brought out in one of Abulafia’s comparisons of kabbala and philosophy, where he declares that the existence of the Agent Intellect

“is apprehended according to the path of wisdom by means of all the languages but, according to kabbala, its speech [that of the Agent Intellect] can be attained only by means of the holy tongue. However, the existence of the [agent] intellect can be understood in every language, according to the view of every perfect kabbalist.”<sup>64</sup>

Conspicuously, this hierarchy of languages shows that Maimonides’ approach, expressed as everyone knew in Arabic, is part of the path of wisdom, namely philosophy, which can impart knowledge, but not a revelation that is conditioned by resort to Hebrew. Is this insistence upon the superiority of Hebrew over the regular philosophical parlance a total misinterpretation of Maimonides’ position? In general the answer is yes. However, at least in one instance, it seems that Abulafia has a case for his resorting to one of his linguistic interpretive approaches to the *Guide* itself. Maimonides mentions in one of his discussions that the proper understanding of a certain verse in Zecharia may be achieved by means of changing the order of the letters of a certain word:

“More wonderful<sup>65</sup> than this<sup>66</sup> is the intimation aroused through the use of a certain term whose letters are identical with those of another term; solely the order of the letters is changed; and between the two terms there is in no way an etymological connection or a community of meaning. You will find an example in the parables of Zechariah when, in a vision of prophecy, he takes two staves in order to shepherd cattle, naming one of them grace [*no’am*] and the other ravagers [*hovlim*].<sup>67</sup> The intention of this parable was to show that in its beginnings the religious community subsisted in the grace of the Lord . . . Afterwards the state of this community came to such a pass that obedience to God became repugnant to it and that it became repugnant to God. Accordingly He set up *hovlim* [ravagers] like Jeroboam and Manasseh as its chiefs. This is to be understood according to the etymological derivation of the word; for *hovlim* derives from the expression, *mehabbelim keramim* [that spoil the vineyards]<sup>68</sup>. In addition, the prophet inferred therefrom, I mean from the term *hovlim*, their repugnance for the Law and the repugnance of God for them. However, this meaning can only be derived from *hovlim* through changing the order of the ‘*ha*’, the ‘*ba*’, and the ‘*lam*’. Now it says, within the context of this parable, to signify the notion of repugnance and disgust: ‘And My soul became

impatient of them, and their soul also loathed [*bohalah*] Me.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly it changed the order of *habol* and transformed it into *bahol*. Through this method very strange things appear, which are likewise secrets, as in its dictum with regards to the Chariot: brass and burnished and foot and calf and lightning, and in other passages. If you carefully examine each passage in your mind, they will become clear to you — after your attention has been aroused — from the gist of what has been set forth here.<sup>70</sup>

Maimonides attempts to relate the two terms that occurs in the same context in Zechariah: *Hoblim* and *bohalah*. According to his proposal, by changing the order of letters one may learn the intention of the parable: the Israelite kings who were designated as *hoblim*, namely, the ravagers, are also those who have loathed the Torah and are therefore loathed by God. However, what seems to be important from the vantage point of our discussion is not only the peculiar example, but also the rhetoric involved in it. By changing the order of letters someone may indeed find out some “strange” things, which I read as bizarre, or irrelevant conclusions; but also attain some secrets, even such as relate to the most sublime realm of speculation: the divine chariot.

It is this last point that is important for Abulafia: by manipulating the order of letters, someone may reach, at least in some instances, secrets of the Torah. It is quite obvious that Maimonides does not restrict this method to one instance alone, but asserts that this particular case should inspire similar types of interpretations, apparently regarding “each passage”. The Hebrew translation invites indeed a much more comprehensive understanding of Maimonides: “and in places other than this one, when you will search by your mind, in every place things will become clear to you, by dint of this intimation.” Interestingly enough, though a negative attitude toward some of the possible results of these permutations is shortly expressed, the more positive attitude seems to be more evident, and the end of the passage does not reiterate the negative remark. Moreover, Maimonides offers some examples which should be decoded by the method he has proposed, some words from the first chapter of Ezekiel, which are prone to a similar interpretation. However, he does not embark on an additional exposition of how to interpret these words in detail.

I would say that none of these words can be interpreted by the same method, since it is impossible to find in the context of these words other words which contain the same letters in a different order. However, we

may assume, following some of the commentators, that this result may be obtained by changing the order of the letters alone, without finding a word that indeed is constituted by those letters in the given context. So, for example, some commentators propose to understand the term brass, namely *nehoshet*, as pointing to *hashhatah*, corruption, while *qalal*, burnished, can point to *qal*, ease, namely easily corruptible. The calf, '*egel*', may be understood as pointing to the concept of roundness, '*agol*', as indeed Maimonides himself points out later on in the *Guide* III:2.<sup>71</sup> Last but not least, the term lightning, *Hashmal*, has been understood by the commentators, following a talmudic interpretation, as a compound of two words, *Hash* and *mal*, namely silent and speaking, as two states of angelic activity.<sup>72</sup> This last “etymology” is quoted explicitly by Maimonides in his exposition of the Chariot, in part III ch. 7<sup>73</sup> where also another “etymology” is offered.<sup>74</sup> Thus, we may assume that the hermeneutical principle of derivation of meaning by means of speculation related to the linguistic structure of a word, its possible meanings derived from permutations of its letters, was not a matter of an abstract theory, but a practice that Maimonides indeed accepted, at least in those cases mentioned above.

Moreover, in another important discussion, which involves a certain hermeneutical vision, Maimonides compares two different discussions of the Chariot in order to learn from the parallel between the “face of an ox” and the “face of a cherub”, — the latter understood as the face of a child, that the ox also should be understood as the face of a man who is similar to an ox. In this context, he refers to “derivations of words, as we have indicated in a flash”; apparently, as pointed out by commentators and by Pines, referring to II:43.<sup>75</sup> It is difficult to ascertain whether the commentators are always right when pointing out the details of how Maimonides would interpret some of the words he mentions there. However, the very fact that Jewish philosophers, who cannot be suspected of mystical or Kabbalistic leanings, had to resort to such a type of interpretation of Maimonides' text, is quite symptomatic of the importance of the linguistic hermeneutics implicit in this important Maimonidean passage.

Abulafia has capitalized on this passage in order to convince his readers that his own linguistic approach can be endorsed by Maimonides. I am aware of at least four discussions of this passage of Maimonides in Abulafia's writings. So, for example, in his *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, after quoting II:43, he writes about Maimonides that

“he has explained the issue of the order of the letters [*zakhar(iah)*] and it is called by the kabbalists the combination of letters.”<sup>76</sup>



In his epistle, *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, he simply states that

“he has testified on the secret of combinations in part II when discussing the issue of prophecy, when dealing with the word *BHL* and *HBL*.”<sup>77</sup>

Abulafia implies that Maimonides was not only hinting at a certain conceptual aspect, namely the secrets involved in Zechariah's verses and in the nouns found in the Chariot account, but also referring to the possibility that a secret technique of interpretation, by means of combinations of letters, is alluded to by the *Guide* in the chapter under consideration. It is important to point out that Abulafia explicitly indicates that this technique, which is a secret, is also that of the kabbalists. This is not to say, according to these quotes and others to the same effect, that Abulafia described Maimonides as a kabbalist; he was careful not to take this step, though he came very close to it.

### From Imagination to Language

How does language work in a kabbalistic system that is so dependent upon Maimonides' psychology as is Abulafia's?

For our purpose it will suffice to mention here the relationship between linguistic creativity and the imaginative faculty: language, according to Aristotelian views espoused by Maimonides, is based upon images and is bound to time and place. As such, a certain tension between language and the intellect, which is considered as having an atemporal type of cognition, permeates Maimonides' thought. As philosopher, he is preoccupied with the relation between intellect and imagination, while the tension between language and intellect is less explicit in his thought. In his definition of prophecy, Maimonides speaks about the transmission of the intellectual forms, emanated from the Agent Intellect, upon the human intellect and then upon imagination. It is only then that the intellectual is translated in imaginary terms, which are either visual, namely images, or linguistic, viz. voices.<sup>78</sup> In other words, imagination stands between intellect and language. However, in some discussions of Abulafia, language, more precisely speech, is conceived as standing between the intellect and imagination. In his discussion of the last of the thirty-six secrets, “worship of God through love” Abulafia writes that

“You should know that speech alone is not the intellect, but it is the true faculty of the soul. And in the soul there is no natural faculty that

is higher than speech because the separate intellect emanates upon it its intellect, just as the sun emanates light upon the eye. Speech is a faculty in the soul similar to the eye in relation to the sun, which generates light upon it. And the light of the eye is the very light of the sun, and not something different from it. Likewise, the intellect of the soul<sup>79</sup> is the very emanation of the Agent Intellect, not something different from it. And the speech, as conceptualized<sup>80</sup> in the intellect, and the imaginative faculty<sup>81</sup> and the appetitive faculty and the sensitive, are ruled by it . . . he intellect commands the speech, and the speech commands the appetitive, and the appetitive the imagination, and imagination the senses, and the senses move, in order to fulfill the command of the intellect.”<sup>82</sup>

Elsewhere, in the continuation of the above discussion, we learn that “the intellect does not operate upon our soul but by means of speech”<sup>83</sup> and again, “the intellect stirs the appetitive faculty by the means of speech.”<sup>84</sup> These descriptions are quite exceptional pieces of medieval psychology. The faculty of speech is seen as different from both the intellectual and the imaginative faculty. It mediates between the intellect and all the lower faculties, though the mechanism of this mediation is not quite clear. Perhaps Abulafia assumes that speech is necessary since it may translate the purely intellectual intention into much more explicit linguistic terms. In any case, this unique status of speech is not found in the *Guide*, though it is not unknown in Abulafia's other writings<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, he sometimes interprets in many of his writings the whole range of components of Maimonides' definition of prophecy — Agent Intellect, the overflow, the human intellect and the imagination — in linguistic terms. So, for example, we learn in one instance that:

“. . . the true essence of prophecy, its cause, is the ‘word’ that reaches the prophet from God by means of the ‘perfect language’, that subsumes the seventy languages.”<sup>86</sup>

The “word” plays the role of the overflow in Maimonides' definition of prophecy, the perfect language being none other than Maimonides' Agent Intellect, and this is the case also insofar as the seventy languages are concerned. It is this emphasis upon the importance of language and of linguistic imagery that is unique to Abulafia as an interpreter of Maimonides' *Guide*. Some Greek forms of ontology and psychology, reverberating in the Middle Ages, have been translated into linguistic terms. The process of transformation of intellection into language, which took place according

to Maimonides at the level of the intra-human psychology, when the imagination translates abstract concepts into linguistic units, takes place in Abulafia at the very source of the intellectual realm, at least insofar as the Agent Intellect is concerned. \*

### From Maimonides to Nahmanides

Despite the fact that the mystical secrets Abulafia discussed are viewed quite often as those espoused by Maimonides, it is also true that in some instances he is aware of his resort to kabbala as an approach differing from the Maimonidean type of exegesis. So, for example, Abulafia mentions both the Maimonidean interpretation of the Bible by means of equivocal terms and allegories, just as he has done in one of the previous quotes,<sup>87</sup> as well as by combinations of letters, acronyms, ends of words, permutations of letters and notariqon. The first has been expounded, as he openly acknowledged, in Maimonides' *Guide*. The goal of his commentary on the *Guide* however, is

“to reveal its secrets to the *illuminati*, including disclosure of the secrets of the Torah, in accordance with our kabbala. This is why this commentary is called *Sitrei Torah*.”<sup>88</sup>

A similar statement, found also in his earlier commentary on the *Guide*, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, is very important for understanding Abulafia's attitude to the *Guide*; he indicates that there is

“the path of the *Guide*, and [another one] according to my own path (89), that is the path of kabbala . . . the paths of kabbala which are the secrets<sup>90</sup> of *Sefer Yetzirah*.”<sup>91</sup>

The occurrence of the first person forms: “our kabbala” and “my own kabbala”, points to the sharp awareness that he espouses a spiritual path which differs from Maimonides. Abulafia's mentioning *Sefer Yetzirah* as his own way reflects his very high evaluation of this book; represented, in other words, in his devoting three books to its contents.<sup>92</sup> However, what seems to be quite fascinating is that Maimonides, who never quoted or referred to this ancient and quite famous work, one of the foundation stones of Jewish mysticism — this strategy being part of Maimonides' deliberate politics of ignoring some embarrassing books — has been combined precisely with *Sefer Yetzirah*. Abulafia was, however, aware that it is his own spiritual method that is combined with that of Maimonides'. The two paths, that of Maimonides' and Abulafia's own blend, which introduced the linguistic

combinatory techniques, were part of the topics he attempted to teach in various parts of southern Europe.<sup>93</sup>

Quite often, Abulafia mentions another source of his kabbala, particularly for its linguistic approach, and that is the writings of Hasidei Ashkenaz. These mystical sources, which provided crucial topics for Abulafia's linguistic approach to kabbala, are quite important for the essence of some mystical and hermeneutical aspects of the ecstatic kabbala, and are even mentioned sometimes in Abulafia's commentaries on the *Guide*. Here, however, I would like to elaborate upon another source, which contributed something to Abulafia's exposition of kabbala as a matter of linguistic techniques. On the page in *Sitrei Torah* where he mentions “our kabbala” Abulafia has also introduced a well-known statement, taken from Nahmanides' introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*. It deals with a tradition, apparently stemming from magical sources,<sup>94</sup> that the whole Torah can be read as a continuum of divine names.<sup>95</sup> According to Abulafia, in this issue, as well as other similar, but unidentified topics

“all the secrets of the Torah are hidden, and yet enable someone to penetrate reality in a right manner. They create the apprehensions of God in the heart of the *illuminati*.”<sup>96</sup>

This explicit resort to Nahmanides' introduction can be found several times in Abulafia's commentaries on the *Guide*.<sup>97</sup> It betrays, I assume, an assumption that the secrets of the Torah of Moses can be decoded by means of the authoritative, though quite divergent exegetical techniques found in the writings of the two other great Moseses: Maimonides and Nahmanides. Thus, in a profound manner, both Moses ben Maimon and Moses ben Nahman, are conceived by Abulafia, as the two great commentators of the ancient Moses' book, the Pentateuch. However, as we well know, the thought of the historical Maimonides was remote from any type of magico-linguistic hermeneutics, while Nahmanides' attitude to allegory in the vein of Maimonides, and to the free gematria type of hermeneutics, was more than reticent.<sup>98</sup> Abulafia's juxtaposition of the two masters is, therefore, quite an unexpected endeavor. However, it should be emphasized that Abulafia's project does not attempt to harmonize between the two authors. Rather, we may assume that Nahmanides' kind of exegesis is conceived as superior to the allegorical one. Later on in Abulafia's career, he will classify Maimonides' form of allegorical exegesis as the fourth out of seven, while regarding techniques similar to that of Nahmanides' as one of the three superior, kabbalistic exegetical techniques.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, in his commentaries on Maimonides' secrets, Abulafia adduces conspicuous non-Maimonidean exegetical devices, which are intended to uncover secrets of the Torah. By his giving one of his commentaries the title *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia implies that Maimonides' own interpretation of biblical secrets is partial, veiled and apparently conditioned by the exilic situation. These are the reasons why they should be supplemented by kabbalistic types of exegesis, as understood by him. We may assume that this combination of allegorical and linguistic exegeses, arranged hierarchically, reveal Abulafia's awareness that he is offering the acme of a religious development. This because, inter alia, his exegetical system is more complex and therefore, I assume, he would regard it as more perfect. Maimonides himself chose the way of exclusion by deliberately marginalizing certain forms of Jewish tradition and certain ancient and medieval philosophies which were not consonant with his own philosophical synthesis. The synthetic approach is one of the major, though not explicit, strategies in Maimonides' spiritual endeavour, but it worked just in one direction. By selecting medieval Neoplatonism, he was able to offer a comprehensive Jewish theology which was rather novel in Judaism. Nahmanides was also exclusive in his approach: quite critical, though only rarely mentioning names, of allegorical exegesis and philosophical intellectualism, he is much more in concert with those forms of thought found in some Jewish philosophers who preceded Maimonides, like Yehudah ha-Levi or Abraham bar Hiyya, for example. Nahmanides was also more open toward magic and had a positive view of the perception of Hebrew as a natural language. Maimonides' stand on this issue weakens the importance of the sacred language by attenuating its special status. The association of his noetics with Al-Farabi's sceptical approach, versus the view, later accepted by Averroes, of the union of the human with the divine intellect, and his description of prophecy as part of the glorious past, were overcome by his Kabbalistic interpreter, who attempted to attribute views carefully obliterated by Maimonides as the secret beliefs of the *Guide*.

In his more complex synthesis, Abulafia built one of the spiritual worlds possible at the beginning of the last third of the thirteenth century: on the one hand, combination of Maimonides' Neoplatonist version of Judaism with the contemporary Jewish interest in Averroism which had become integral to Jewish philosophy in Provence and Italy; and on the other hand the incorporation of Ashkenazi esoteric traditions which had come from southern Germany to Spain, more precisely to Barcelona, and to Italy. His inclusive approach exploited forms of thought and spirituality that were in

his generation in conflict, but he attempted to compose a concert out of these dissonant sounds. In other words, Abulafia's special type of kabbala represents a unique case where Maimonidean and Nahmanidean esotericism were combined. Doubtless, this is one of the earliest, if not the earliest juxtaposition of these figures, but unlike most of the numerous later comparisons between the two, the views of these figures have been combined by Abulafia. In this combination, however, both forms of esotericism suffered drastic changes, obliterating major inhibitions of each author. The uniqueness of this synthesis is unparalleled in Spanish kabbala, or in any forms of later kabbala; it is an attempt to exploit the strong elements in both systems and offer a third one, which would capitalize on the authority and insights of all the major thirteenth century masters known to Abulafia, including the Hasidei Ashkenaz. To all these components which inspired Abulafia's synthesis, we have to add Abulafia's idiosyncratic personality: open enough to learn various kinds of intellectual developments and innovative enough to combine them; coupled with a personal investment in some of the topics he studied, which transformed those heterogeneous traditions into a practical system. Incongruent as Abulafia's synthesis is, it should be judged by his main criterion: whether it could inspire an interest in the ecstatic experience he attempted to promote. His commentaries on the *Guide* have been one of the main tools for such a promotion. The move toward a more synthetic, global or inclusive approach to spiritual modes is, however, not unique to Abulafia. Some contemporary kabbalists in Castile, particularly his former student R. Joseph Gikatilla, also opened themselves to a variety of intellectual trends, contributing to what I regard as a real renaissance of kabbala. This took the form of an innovative approach to the very concept of kabbala and the growth of a luxuriant Kabbalistic literature.<sup>100</sup> One of the more obvious symptoms of this more creative type of kabbala is the phenomenon of returning to the same literary genre more than once by the same kabbalist. Just as Abulafia wrote three versions of commentary on the thirty-six secrets of the *Guide*, and three commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*, so Gikatilla, Moses de Leon and Joseph of Hamadan each wrote three versions of their commentaries of *Ten Sefirot*<sup>101</sup>, and the *Zohar* has several versions of the '*Idra*'.<sup>102</sup>

As in the case of the Castilian kabbala, so also in that of the Abulafian one, it is important from a scholarly point of view not only to find out the systemic consistency, but also to explore the variety of sources which nourished the Kabbalistic writings, the manner in which they were combined, and the problems inherent in any significant synthesis between sub-

stantially different forms of thought.<sup>103</sup> The search for ultimate coherence, so visible in the modern scholarship of kabbala, should be only a preliminary effort, and should not be imposed on thinkers whose main interest was less a well organized philosophical system, than an expression of, and sometimes also a directive toward a more experiential mystical path. As we shall see below, in addition to the interpretations of the *Guide* in Abulafia's books, some of his followers have contributed more radical ones. Let me attempt to summarize one major development in the interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide*: most of the extant commentaries on the *Guide* written by Jewish philosophers follow the main lines proposed by the author. They, together with R. Shmuel and Moshe ibn Tibbon, R. Ya'aqov Anatoli and R. Hillel of Verona, may be described as adopting a scholastic approach to Maimonides. That is, they accepted the framework of Maimonidean thought, even if on some points they dissented from it. However, Maimonides special strategy of esotericism generated a complex situation: his emphasis upon secrecy and the fact that he did not disclose his secrets encouraged some comentators to project their own secrets, or what they received from others as Maimonides' secrets, into the *Guide*. Abulafia found in the *Guide* hints, as we have seen above, concerning combinations of letters<sup>104</sup>. However, though implicitly viewing the *Guide* as a book which is consonant with kabbala, he was not ready either to describe Maimonides as a fulfilled kabbalist, or to attribute to him other Kabbalistic, spurious writings. Rather, informed by other layers of Jewish esotericism, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Hasidei Ashkenaz and Nahmanides' remarks, Abulafia attempted to offer a comprehensive and synthetic vision of Jewish esotericism, and read the *Guide* accordingly. I propose to designate this approach "perspectivism", since it applies to Maimonides some perspectives which were not totally imposed upon the interpreted material.

Some anonymous authors, however, attributed to Maimonides even talismanic and astrological views.<sup>105</sup> Even when those views stand in diametrical opposition to the more philosophical views of the *Guide*, someone could claim that the attributed views are part of the secret stand of the Great Eagle. Furthermore, the fact that Maimonides attacked some views relating to the linguistic and magical aspects of the already existing Jewish traditions, provoked reactions which attempted, in some cases, to infuse in Maimonides' writings themselves the very views he criticised. This approach, the pseudepigraphical one, belongs to the circle very close to the ideas of Abulafia, but should not be identified with him. Unlike

Nahmanides and some of his followers' rather reserved-while-respectful approach, the pseudepigraphers attempted to integrate Maimonides into their camp. Those four approaches, all part of thirteenth century kabbala, should be well-distinguished from the much more critical attitude found among those who either bitterly attacked the *Guide*, or criticised it more moderately.

### Abulafia's List of Secrets of the Guide

What is the relation between the subject matter of the *Guide* and the secrets Abulafia ascribes to the *Guide*? As we know, the *Guide*'s chapters do not have titles, or numbers, and Abulafia had to decide what the subject-matters are, according to "our thought".<sup>106</sup> Immediately afterwards, he indicates that he is writing down

"all the secrets found in this book [namely the *Guide*], just as we have received them from the mouth of the sages of the generation, our masters, may God keep them alive."<sup>107</sup>

This statement has a certain historical importance: Abulafia claims that he received the thirty-six secrets from unidentified masters who, to the best of his knowledge, were still alive in 1280 when *Sitrei Torah* was composed in Capua. According to another passage, Abulafia studied the *Guide* with R. Hillel ben Shemuel of Verona, in Capua, in his youth. Hillel was still alive in 1280, when Abulafia wrote his commentary.<sup>108</sup> However, even if we assume that Hillel is a plausible candidate for being one of Abulafia's alleged sources for the list of secrets, there still seems to be a problem: Abulafia uses a plural form, assuming that there was a group of several unrelated individuals who passed him the list, and for the time being it seems the historical evidence available does not allow us to speculate about the identity of those other masters of Abulafia. However, even if the above statement reflects a real case of transmission, as I am inclined to believe, this should not be identified with the assumption that it stems from a direct tradition stemming from Maimonides himself. In any case, Abulafia reiterates the same list of secrets in all the three commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*, a fact that may confirm his claim that he had a fixed tradition regarding the subject-matter and the specific order in which they should be espoused.

An additional confession of Abulafia seems to emphasize the need to allow for the existence of such a group. In his commentary on the *Guide* he claims that he is writing down everything

“from the beginning to the end, [just] as I too have received it from the transmitters, in the form of chapter headings”.<sup>109</sup>

The phrase translated as “from the transmitters in the form of chapter headings,” “*min ha-mosrim rashei peraqim*” is quite interesting; it may be interpreted as pointing either to a certain group, or to a certain specific form of transmission, which deals with chapter headings, in the spirit of the Talmudic phrase and of Maimonides’ claims.<sup>110</sup> Interestingly enough, this Rabbinic expression recurs numerous times in the ecstatic kabbala, as we have seen in paragraph IV above, but it is especially interesting to compare Abulafia’s confession of having received the secrets of the *Guide* with that of another ecstatic kabbalist, about his studying kabbala:

“a divine man, a kabbalist, taught me the path of kabbala by “chapter headings”. Despite the fact that because of the little I knew of the science of nature it seemed to me to be impossible, my master said to me: ‘My son, why do you negate an issue you did not experience? Indeed, it would be worthwhile to experience it’.”<sup>111</sup>

However, such a view is quite rare in other forms of contemporary kabbala. It is marginal in Nahmanides’ school and rather rare among the Castilian kabbalists. Therefore, it is not a cliché or a topos, found outside of his school, that someone testifies that he personally received a secret tradition. Another claim regarding a tradition related to the *Guide* is Abulafia’s statement that there are 177 chapters in the *Guide*<sup>112</sup>:

“There is a tradition in our hand regarding the number of all the chapters included in each of the three parts of the book.”<sup>113</sup>

Just as the number of secrets hidden in the *Guide* so the number of chapters is conceived to be a tradition, and both refer to a certain numerical decoding of a Biblical verse or term. If this numerical and exegetical approach of Abulafia reflects a previous view, then we may assume that he inherited not only a philosophical tradition but also one that had some numerological aspects. He received, in other words, an interpretation of the *Guide* which included not only a tradition referring to the philosophical aspects of secrets in the book, but also a tradition with more formal aspects, possessing numerical implications.

Though Abulafia also mentions received traditions in the context of numerical issues found in his commentaries, I have no doubt that these traditions are part of a post-Maimonidean development, and that it is indeed part of a misinterpretation of the *Guide* in the direction of a more linguistic

sense. Confronted with the logocentric interpretation of Judaism offered by Maimonides, the kabbalists, and particularly Abraham Abulafia, had recourse to a variety of already existing Jewish linguistic traditions in order to offer another vision of this religion, emphasizing the richness of the realm of language as represented by Hebrew.

## R. Zerahiah’s Testimony and its Parallels

In this context, another important issue is to be mentioned: Rabbi Zerahiah ben She’altiel Hen, known also as Gracian, an Aristotelian philosopher born in Barcelona, who left for Rome and other places in Italy in the early seventies of the thirteenth century,<sup>114</sup> and corresponded with R. Hillel of Verona, was acquainted with numerical and magical interpretations of the *Guide*. In a letter to R. Hillel, after a brutal attack concerning the latter’s “misunderstandings” of the *Guide*, Zerahiah claims that in Maimonides’ book

“there are no secrets or enigmas<sup>115</sup> of the *gematria* sort or of combination of letters, nor of the sort of names, of the talismans<sup>116</sup> and amulets used by the masters of names<sup>117</sup> and writers of the amulets; nor of the multiplicity of angels or anything mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Sefer Raziel*<sup>118</sup> or *Sefer Shiu’ur Qomah*. Everything the Gaon, our Rabbi, blessed be the memory of this righteous person, has mentioned from the words of the sages, blessed be their memory, small and great, relating to prophecy, the *Merkavah* or creation, [which are] written in the Torah, are all from the category I have mentioned<sup>119</sup> and or related to its intention. And if someone has secrets, enigmas, allusions or parables which are not from the category I have mentioned to you, they are all vain and worthless things.”<sup>120</sup>

This passage is part of a confrontation between universalistic and particularistic trends in Judaism; Maimonides, one of the major figures of the integration of the naturalistic thought as expounded in certain trends of Greek and Arabic thought, provoked both a reaction which negated his naturalization of religion,<sup>121</sup> and an attempt to interpret him in a more particularistic manner, by resorting to linguistic topics of Abulafia and his possible sources, as we shall see later on. Nature, which is one of the main concerns for Maimonides, has been supplanted to a great extent by language, conceived by the kabbalists as superior, either as a more powerful means for action, namely magic, or for acceleration of the intellectual process, namely ecstasy. R. Zerahiah is no doubt representative of an intellec-

tual reaction to these two mystico-magical reactions; he sharply criticises Nahmanides' attempt to offer a non-Aristotelian picture of the world,<sup>122</sup> and the Abulafian-like attempts to infuse magical and mystical elements into the secrets of the *Guide*.

The above description of the non-naturalistic interpretations of the secrets of the *Guide* include at least two distinct categories: one dealing with *gematria* and combinations of letters, both of them fitting perfectly Abulafia's approach to the *Guide* and which may refer to an ecstatic reading of the *Guide* such as is advocated in Abulafia's commentaries; the other category, however, dealing with divine names, talismanic figures or amulets, seems to refer to writings different from those of Abulafia, who opposed magic, including linguistic magic.<sup>123</sup> In any case, no positive attitude to magic, neither a recommendation to use talismans or amulets, can be found in Abulafia's writings, even less in his commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*. These two categories, the ecstatic-combinatory on the one hand, and the magical-talismanic on the other, identify a plausible distinction between different approaches, or models of thought and praxis in themselves, and are also corroborated by the syntax of Zerahiah's formulation of his critique.

The importance of this distinction is even greater since a certain literary piece, attributing to Maimonides an interest in magic and astrology on the one hand, and in divine names on another, is available. This is the case in the abovementioned spurious epistle attributed to Maimonides, *Megillat Setarim*, where magical names, talismanic magic and angels are mentioned as if they are found in the *Guide*.<sup>124</sup> This epistle is not dated and I see in the above passage of Zerahiah plausible evidence for *aterminus ante quem* for the emergence of some of the ideas included in it. Though this epistle is quite close to Abulafia's thought, I see no reason to attribute it to Abulafia himself. The possibility that it has been criticized by Zerahiah helps us in dating it to the circle of Abulafia's teacher, apparently in Barcelona, or to his followers later on in Italy.<sup>125</sup> It should be emphasized that in a manner quite reminiscent of the way we have analysed R. Zerahiah's text as pointing to two different groups, *Megillat Setarim* mentions three types of kabbala, the first being the prophetic kabbala and the third the "practical kabbala".<sup>126</sup> I see this distinction as similar respectively to the combinatory technique and the talismanic praxis in the above-mentioned distortion of the *Guide*. We may learn from Zerahiah's epistle that Abulafia was not the only person in Italy who embraced a mystical approach to the *Guide*, though he may be the source, or one of the sources, for such a reading there.

This seems to be the case also in another possible reference to a mystical reading of the *Guide* found, as pointed out by Ravitzky, in Zerahiah's own *Commentary on the Guide*, where he mentions "many persons, whose mind is polluted by erroneous opinions," in connection with discussions related to the interpretation of the term Ben, son, which hints at divine names. The affinity between this passage and Abulafia's similar interpretation of the term Ben is quite evident.<sup>127</sup> However, we should again emphasize that R. Zerahiah mentions "many persons", thus allowing for the possibility that Abulafia was not alone in his ecentric reading of the *Guide*.

Whether the other persons who advocated such a reading are students of Abulafia, or rather earlier authors who had inspired his vision of the *Guide*, as he himself claims in the above quote, is a question that cannot be answered definitively on the basis of the extant material. However, even if such a definitive answer is not in our reach presently, I am inclined to opt for the latter alternative for the following two reasons:

a] R. Zerahiah's critiques are relatively early, in the life-time of Abulafia, and I doubt if we can document repercussions of his interpretations among his students, though he had such students in the very town in which he started to study the *Guide*, Capua, near Rome. On the other hand, he expressly indicates that the secrets he expounded have been received from several persons. Thus, though we cannot rule out the dissemination of Abulafian interpretations among some younger persons in Italy, to whom Zerahiah would react, it seems more plausible to accept the existence of earlier thoughts, and maybe even writings, which served as the sources for Abulafia himself.

b] The talismanic reading of the *Guide* implied in the term *tzurah* which occurs in Zerahiah's quote is found in the spurious epistle, where the term *ruhaniyyut*, a crucial term for talismanic magic, occurs.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in some ecstatic Kabbalistic texts written after the death of Abulafia, as in some of the writings of R. Isaac of Acre, the term *ruhaniyyut* recurs frequently.<sup>129</sup>

Though I am not aware of a mystical-magical interpretation of the *Guide* in Spain before Abulafia it seems to me nevertheless quite plausible, for the following reasons. Inroads of talismanic terminology in kabbala are already evident in the sixties of the 13th century, in the writings of R. Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malka, though his thought was not influenced by Maimonides, and a magical reading of the *Guide* seems to be implausible in his case.<sup>130</sup> This seems to be the case also where other kabbalists are concerned. R. Bahiya ben Asher, apparently in Barcelona, has recourse to

talismanic terms in his commentary on Deut, 18:11,<sup>131</sup> as does R. Abraham of Esqira, a late 13th or early 14th century Spanish author of a voluminous Kabbalistic book, *Sefer Yesod 'Olam*. He uses the term *ruhaniyyut*, but again he was, strangely enough, not aware of Maimonides' book.<sup>132</sup> R. Bahiya and R. Abraham of Esqira have not too much in common insofar as their Kabbalistic systems are concerned; though both were eclectic authors, their compilations draw upon different kabbalistic sources. Nevertheless, they might have something in common: the latter kabbalist was acquainted with R. Shem Tov ben Abraham ibn Gaon, a kabbalist who was part of the Barcelona circle of kabbalists which was cultivated, at least for a considerable period of time, by R. Bahiya. So far, such a nexus may be inconsequential; however, it is R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon who mentions, for the first time, a Kabbalistic vision of Maimonides, and even mentions that he saw an epistle of "Maimonides" in Spain, depicted in terms strongly reminiscent of Heikhalot literature. In his *Migdal 'Oz*, a commentary on Maimonides' *Hilkhot Yesodei Torah*, ch. I, he writes that he saw in *Sefarad*, on a very old parchment, *qelaf yashan meyushan*, an epistle that starts with the following sentence:

"I, Moses, the son of Maimon, when I had descended to the chambers of the *Merkavah*, understood the issue of the end etc., and his words were similar to the words of true kabbalists, which were alluded to by our great Rabbi *Ramban*, blessed be his memory, at the beginning of [his] commentary on the Torah."

This passage was written around 1320 in the Galilee, probably in Safed, and it refers to something R. Shem Tov had seen already in *Sefarad*, a term which is quite ambiguous from the geographical point of view. We may assume, but this is not quite sure, that it may point to Castile, where he was in his youth for a while, to study kabbala with R. Moshe of Burgos. This would mean that the fabrication of the document, described as written upon an old parchment, must have been done not later than the early eighties of the thirteenth century. If so, I wonder whether Scholem's assumption, regarding the nexus with the second controversy concerning the *Guide*, which presumably would have inspired the composition of this forgery, is correct.<sup>133</sup>

The truncated form of the quote, short as it is, may nevertheless help us understand better the background of the forgeries. When mentioning the similarity between the content of the epistle and the words of Nahmanides at the beginning of his commentary on the Torah, R. Shem Tov apparently

refers to Nahmanides' preface to his commentary. There he mentions only once words of kabbalists, namely the statement about the Torah as the continuum of Divine Names. I suppose, following Scholem's suggestion to this effect, that this particular view of Nahmanides' was compared by Shem Tov with the lost spurious epistle.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, again as Scholem has suggested, the phrase "I have descended to the chambers of the *Merkavah*" may reflect a certain reverberation of an expression he found only in R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadot*.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, as the same kabbalist put it elsewhere in his commentary on Maimonides' *Code of the Law*,<sup>136</sup> Maimonides offered rationales for the commandments from his own reason. This was an approach that astonished the kabbalist, who claims that something like that should not be done, especially by someone "who has received the secrets orally from one person to another." This conception of transmission of secret may also reflect the view of Nahmanides, which again, was projected onto Maimonides.<sup>137</sup>

The time of the forgery of the epistle quoted by R. Shem Tov would be not earlier than the beginning of the seventies, when Nahmanides' commentary on the Bible was already circulating. Thus, it would be safer to conjecture that the Kabbalistic interpretation of Maimonides was undertaken early in the seventies of the 13th century in Catalonia, a presupposition that coincides with the time Abraham Abulafia started his Kabbalistic career in the same region. Both Abulafia, as described above, and the anonymous forger of the epistle, have combined Maimonides with Nahmanides' type of discussions.

It should be emphasized that the anonymous forger has attributed to Maimonides a knowledge of the time of end like Abulafia's claim that he was revealed the time of the end. The preoccupation with an eschatological topic fits perfectly one of Abulafia's sentence, where he declared, in a letter sent to Barcelona at the end of the eighties, that God has announced to him "the time of the end of the exile and the beginning of the redemption".<sup>138</sup> If Scholem's two conjectures relating the epistle to Geronese material are correct, as well as my two suggestions related to another Geronese linkage and one relating to Abulafia, then the locale for the fabrication would be rather Catalonia than Castile, though the possibility of a Castilian locale for the fabrication may be strengthened by a series of pseudo-epigraphical writings which emerged from this region, including the most famous of Kabbalistic books, the *Zohar*. However, the circle of writings designated in scholarship as the "Contemplation Circle" also produced pseudographs attributed to Jewish figures of late antiquity. In our case,

however, the attribution to Maimonides is not a regular case of projecting own's ideas on an ancient figure, whose views are rather vague and fragmentary, in the search for one's authorizing own kabbalistic innovations, but on the contrary, the conversion of a famous and strong opponent into their advocate.

An additional observation regarding forgery in the Castile region concerns the early 13th century kabbalist R. Yehudah ben Yaqar and also Nahmanides. We may learn this from some statements of R. Moshe ben Shimeon of Burgos, an acquaintance also of Abulafia.<sup>139</sup> Interestingly, this Moses of Burgos was one of the earliest teachers of R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon in kabbala. However, even if the Castilian circle of kabbalists would be a possible candidate for the forgery of the epistle quoted by Shem Tov, I doubt whether this is the case with the epistle which portrays Maimonides as a magician. Again, the time of the forgery of the epistle quoted by R. Shem Tov is not earlier than the beginning of the seventies, when Nahmanides' commentary on the Bible was already circulating.

Thus, it would be safer to conjecture that the Kabbalistic interpretation of Maimonides was undertaken early in the seventies of the 13th century in Catalonia, a presupposition that coincides with the time Abraham Abulafia started his Kabbalistic career in the same region. Both Abulafia and the anonymous forger of the epistle combine Maimonides with Nahmanides' type of discussions. Abulafia testifies that he started to study kabbala in Barcelona, the very place where R. Shem Tov learned a great part of his Kabbalistic knowledge.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, even if we assume that Abulafia might not have received oral traditions about the secrets of the *Guide* in this city, he nonetheless claims that he taught the *Guide* there to two persons, R. Yehudah Salmon and a certain R. Kalonymus.<sup>141</sup> Also R. Isaac of Acre, who uses the talismanic terminology, was for a while in this city. Moreover, he is one of the few kabbalists who was acquainted with the mystico-magical views of R. Yehudah ibn Malka, though we do not know whether this knowledge was acquired in Barcelona. And, indeed, another kabbalist, R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who states that the *Guide* should be understood in accordance with oral tradition, in a manner reminiscent of Abulafia's claim, was apparently an inhabitant of Barcelona. He speaks about "these attributes necessitate an interpretation received from mouth to mouth."<sup>142</sup>

Last, but not least, R. Zerachiah ben She'altiel Hen came to Italy from Barcelona, and this fact could account for some of the descriptions of the misinterpretations of the *Guide* found in that city.<sup>143</sup> Are these recurrences

of Barcelona mere coincidences? This is possible, and I am not sure that we should push the circumstantial evidence we have collected too far. However, in the absence of any alternative explanation as to the milieu which could produce the anonymous *Megillat Setarim* that was printed by Edelman, I would like to suggest that it was in this city, or its near vicinity, that a talismanic understanding of the *Guide*, and of ecstatic kabbala in general, emerged. In any case, this spurious epistle represents, or at least reflects, a relatively early fabrication of a talismanic approach attributed to Maimonides of which Abulafia either was not aware or which he had rejected.

### Concluding Remarks

Let me attempt to summarize Abulafia's attitude to the *Guide*, as emerging from the above discussion: he was not eager, unlike Gikatilla, to criticise Maimonides' stand on language sharply and openly, even though it dramatically undermined his own approach. On the other hand, he also was wary of transforming Maimonides into a fullfledged kabbalist, by openly attributing to him his own Kabbalistic views and even less to take the road of the anonymous writers who transformed Maimonides into a repentant philosopher who become a kabbalist, or finally into a Kabbalistic magician, a view that would contradict his own beliefs. Thus, from a certain point of view, Abulafia may be regarded as a moderate thinker acting in a very loaded minefield of speculative interests and bizarre transformations of ideas and figures. This transformation was achieved by means of personal transition from one intellectual and spiritual system to another, and by pseudepigraphical attributions, which were supposed to "align" the opponent to adhere to one's own tenets. He attempted to keep open as many allegiances, at times weakly, as possible, as long as he was not attacked and criticised. He preferred to make strong moves in matters of intellectual synthesis without, however, using too strong a rhetoric. Apparently he was much more concerned in what seemed to be his major task: to advance the propagation of his ecstatic kabbala without provoking too much controversy.

This strategy did not succeed: after a few years of quiet wandering on the Northern coast of the Mediterranean, he was arrested in 1279 in Trani, Italy. Apparently this arrest was instigated by Jews, but later on he was arrested in Rome by the Franciscan "little friars", the Minorites. Some years later, sometime in the late eighties, his prophetic and messianic claims, and more implicitly also his understanding of Jewish texts, encountered



bitter opposition from the Rashba, a kabbalist himself; a case that demonstrates how complex the late 13th century Jewish religious scene was. We may assume that the Rashba was referring also to any one of his three commentaries on the *Guide* when he labelled Abulafia's writings as interpreting "the scriptures and the words of the sages [by means of] gematria."<sup>144</sup> His Kabbalistic interpretation of the *Guide* was assaulted, again by a kabbalist, at the end of the 15th century.<sup>145</sup>

The Spanish kabbala, which started to crystallize in more particularistic and centralistic molds already at the end of the 13th century, and which culminated this process by the end of the 15th century, attempted to establish its own domain as a full alternative to philosophy. Abulafia's synthesis, as presented in his commentaries on the *Guide*, nevertheless survived, especially outside Spain, in numerous manuscripts which may compete, at least from the statistical point of view, with most of the philosophical commentaries. It is the selective grid of the scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which has corroborated some of the inhibitions of printers since the Renaissance, leading to the neglect of a whole range of mystical interpretations offered by Jewish thinkers to the *Guide*. Inspired mainly by the search for the authentic, though very often, elusive and esoteric views of the *Guide*, Maimonidean scholars relegated the study of the role played by his book in more mystical circles, to the scholars of mysticism. They, in turn, conceived — as I have pointed out above — this part of cultural studies as dealing with too philosophical an issue. Caught between the two excessively puristic approaches, Abulafia's three commentaries on the *Guide* have remained in the shadow of both the study of Jewish philosophy and mysticism.

## NOTES

- 1 *Geschichte der juedischen Philosophie des Mittelalters*, (Berlin, 1907), vol. I pp. 179–236.
- 2 *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), p. 531. See also my remarks on this stand of Rosenzweig's in "Franz Rosenzweig and the Kabbalah" in P. Mendes-Flohr, ed., *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (University Press of New England, 1987), pp. 168–171.
- 3 *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1908), vol. VII pp. 385–402; For an adaptation of Graetz's thesis, with major changes, see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, London, 1988), pp. 251–253; "Maimonides and

- Kabbalah", in I. Twersky, ed., *Studies in Maimonides* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 31–33; see too Mark Verman, *The Book of Contemplation, Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (SUNY, Albany, 1992), pp. 20–24.
- 4 *Kabbalah* (New York, 1974), p. 45: "Kabbalah, in its historical significance, can be defined as the product of the interpenetration of Jewish Gnosticism and neoplatonism."
- 5 G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* tr. A. Arkush, ed., R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton University Press, Princeton, JPS, Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 404–414. See, however, his statement in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1967), p. 24: "Kabbalah certainly did not arise as reaction against philosophical 'enlightenment'"; as well as his "*Me-Ḥoqer li-Mequbbal*", *Tarbiz*, vol. 6 (1935), pp. 91–92 (Hebrew); "Maimonides dans l'oeuvre des Kabbalistes" *Cahiers juifs* vol. 3 (1935), pp. 104–105.
- 6 Georges Vajda, "Une Chapitre de l'Histoire du Conflit Entre la Kabbale et la Philosophie: la Polemique Anti-intellectualiste de Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi" *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et litteraire du Moyen Age*, vol. XXXI (1956) pp. 45–127, idem, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensee juive du Moyen Age*, (Mouton, Paris, 1962); idem, "Comment le philosophe juif Moise de Narbonne comprenait-il les paroles extatiques des soufies?" *Actas del primer congreso de estudios arabes islamicos*, (Madrid, 1964), pp. 129–135; "Recherches sur la synthese philosophico-Kabbalistique de Samuel ibn Motot," *AHDLMA* vol. XXVII (1960), pp. 29–63. Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's Epistle on Shi'ur Qomah", in A. Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, Mass. 1967), pp. 242–244, idem, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's *Puerta del Cielo*" *HUCA* vol. 53 (1982), pp. 321–324, as well as note 15 below. Dov Schwartz, "Contacts Between Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism in the Rise of the Fifteenth Century", *Daat* vol. 29 (1992), pp. 41–68 (Hebrew).
- 7 P. Hadot, *Exercices Spirituelles, Annuaire de la Ve section de l'ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes* LXXXIV, pp. 25–70; Phillip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness* (The Hague, 1963), Richard T. Wallis, "Nous as Experience", R. Baine Harris, ed., *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk, 1976), pp. 122 and 143 note 1 for the pertinent bibliography; Michael Morgan, *Platonic Piety, Philosophy & Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1990).
- 8 Scholem, "*Mi-Ḥoqer li-Mequbbal*".
- 9 M. Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560–1660" *Italia Judaica* (Roma, 1986), II pp. 243–262; reprinted in D.B. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York University Press, New York, 1992), pp. 345–368.

- 10 David Blumenthal, "Maimonides' Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Prophecy of Moses" *Studies in Medieval Culture* vol. X (1981), pp. 51–67.
- 11 Ze'ev Harvey, "Kabbalistic Elements in R. Hasdai Crescas' book 'Or ha-Shem'" *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* vol. 2 (1983), pp. 75–109 (Hebrew); Moshe Hayyim Weiler, "Inquiries in the Kabbalistic Terminology of R. Joseph Gikatilla and its Relation to Maimonides", *HUCA* vol. 37 (1966), pp. 13–44 (Hebrew); Elliot R. Wolfson, "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. LVII (1991), pp. 179–242; Charles Mopsik, "Philosophie et souci philosophique: les deux grands courants de la pensée juive", *Archivio di filosofia* vol. LXI (1993), pp. 247–254; Dov Schwartz, "Divine Immanence in Medieval Jewish Philosophy" *Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* vol. III no. 2 (1994), pp. 249–278; Idel, "Divine Attributes and Sefirot in Jewish Theology" in S.O. Heller Willensky, M. Idel, eds., *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 87–112 (Hebrew); idem, "The Study Program of Yohanan Alemanno" *Tarbiz* vol. 48 (1979), pp. 303–330 (Hebrew), "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance" in B.D. Cooperman, ed., *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983), pp. 186–242; "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in Early 17th Century", *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, Isadore Twersky — Bernard D. Septimus, eds., (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 137–200; "Kabbalah, Platonism and Prisca Theologia: the Case of Menasseh ben Israel" in Y. Kaplan, H. Meshoulam, R. Popkin, eds., *Menasseh ben Israel and his World* (Brill, Leiden, 1989), pp. 207–219; Havah Tirosh-Rothschild, "Sefiroth as the Essence of of God in the Writings of David Messer Leon", *Association of Jewish Studies Review* vol. 7–8 (1982–1983), pp. 409–425; Nissim Yosha, *Myth and Metaphor* (Ben-Zvi Institute and The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1994) (Hebrew).
- 12 See Sara O. Heller-Wilensky, "Isaac ibn Latif, Philosopher or Kabbalist?" in A. Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, Mass. 1967), pp. 185–223; "The Guide and the Gate, The Dialectical Influence of Maimonides on Isaac ibn Latif and Early Spanish Kabbalah," Ruth Link-Salinger et al, eds., *A Straight Path, Studies, in Medieval Philosophy and Culture, Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1988), pp. 266–278; and "Messianism, Eschatology and Utopia in the Philosophical-Mystical Trend of Kabbalah of the 13th Century", in Z. Baras, ed., *Messianism and Eschatology*, (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 221–238 (Hebrew).
- 13 Isadore Twersky, *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy*, (KTAV Publishing House, New York, 1982), p. 208 and Wilensky, "Messianism", *ibid.*, p. 221.

- 14 Scholem, "*Mi-Hoqer*" (note 5 above). On this issue see more below.
- 15 Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism" *Studies in Jewish Thought* ed., A. Jospe (Detroit, 1981), pp. 200–219.
- 16 On this issue see also the important study of Wirszubski, referred below note 22.
- 17 *Guide* I:71.
- 18 This is the case in some other important figures of Jewish philosophy, like Sa'adiah Gaon, Leone Ebreo, M. Mendelssohn and F. Rosenzweig.
- 19 See Giles Quispel, "From Logos to Mythos" *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 19 (1970), p. 330; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs* tr. I. Abrahams, (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 308–312.
- 20 See *Sitrei Torah*: "These secrets will be revealed during the advent of the Messianic era, by the prophets who will arise (then) and by the Messiah himself, because through them (the secrets of the Torah) all of Israel and those who are drawn to them, will be strengthened." Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 119a.
- 21 Abulafia's opinion was that the Messiah, apparently he himself, will reveal himself in 1290.
- 22 A description of the extant Hebrew fragments and the Latin translation is found in Chaim Wirszubski, "*Liber Redemptionis* — the Early Version of R. Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalistic *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed* in the Latin Translation of Flavius Mithridates," *Divrei ha-Akademia ha-Le'umit ha-Yisraelit le-Mada'im* III (Jerusalem 1970), pp. 139–149, which will be quoted below from its reprinted form in Ch. Wirszubsky, *Between the Lines, Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah and Sabbateanism* M. Idel, ed., (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 135–149 (Hebrew).
- 23 Leviticus 25:31.
- 24 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 117a.
- 25 Ms. Leipzig 39, fol. 4b. See also below beside note 38.
- 26 Ms. Munich 408, fol. 1b.
- 27 This is quite obvious in the writings of Al-Ghazzali, for example; See also below, note 32 the discussion of the kiss of God.
- 28 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 115b. More on this issue see below par. IX.
- 29 Pines, "The Limitation of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja and Maimonides" in I. Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 89–109.
- 30 *Guide* III:51.
- 31 *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1987), p. 125.
- 32 *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford 1582, fol. 14b; Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah" (note 3 above), pp. 77–78.
- 33 For more on the kiss of death in kabbala in general see the material collected and analyzed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, (note 31 above),

- pp. 180–184 and more recently Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God* (Washington University Press, Seattle, 1994), pp. 39–41.
- 34 On this figure see the studies of Joseph B. Sermoneta, mentioned in his last article “Thine Ointments Have a Goodly Fragrance: Rabbi Judah Romano and the Open Text Method” in M. Idel, W.Z. Harvey, E. Schweid, eds., *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume* vol. II (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 77–114 (Hebrew).
- 35 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 140a.
- 36 Namely the Agent Intellect, envisioned as Metatron. For more on this passage see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 10.
- 37 *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yashar*, Ms. Rome-Angelica 38, fol. 31b–32a; *Major Trends*, p. 382; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, (note 31 above), p. 126.
- 38 See also above beside note 25.
- 39 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 115b.
- 40 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, 1952), p. 74.
- 41 For an up-to-date treatment of esotericism in Maimonides and his followers see Aviezer Ravitsky, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, *Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 142–181 (Hebrew). For an English version of this chapter see “Secrets of the Guide to the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries” in ed., I. Twersky, *Studies in Maimonides* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 159–207.
- 42 Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah” (note 3 above), pp. 59–62. For Abulafia’s straightforward rejection of Kabbalistic esotericism see his declaration in *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*: “I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they do that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue; I shall care neither about their thought not about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this is very different from, and even opposite, theirs.” Ms. Oxford 1580, fol. 55a.
- 43 See note 91 below.
- 44 This phrase occurs in the *Guide* II:26; S. Pines, (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1963), p. 331 translates it as ‘mystery of being’. In general I prefer the term ‘secret’ to that of mystery in some instances.
- 45 *Shomer Mitzvah*, Ms. Paris BN 853, fol. 74ab.
- 46 *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, printed in A. Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala* (Leipzig, 1854), p. 12; Chayim Henoch, *Nahmanides, Philosopher and Mystic* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 32 note 14 (Hebrew).
- 47 *Qabbalah sikhliit*. See also in the same book, Ms. Paris BN 770, fols. 161b, 176b, where the same issue may be understood both by means of Kabbalah and the intellect. On fol. 163a, the author advises receiving the Kabbalistic tradition by means of the intellect, in a manner reminiscent of Abulafia’s position.
- 48 Ms. Paris BN 770, fol. 175b. Throughout this book, the phrase ‘rashei peraqim’ recurs, pointing in some instances to the combinatory technique bas-

- ed on *Sefer Yetzirah*. See also Abulafia’s *Sefer 'Imrei Shefer*, Ms. Paris BN 777, p. 91.
- 49 On Maimonides and language see Jean Robelin, *Maimonide et la langage religieux*, (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1991); Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides on Religious Language”, Kraemer, pp. 175–191.
- 50 *Diqduq penimi*.
- 51 Printed in *She'elot la-hakham R. Saul Ashkenazi* (Venice 5334–1574), fols. 20c-d. On the attribution of Gikatilla, see Gottlieb, *Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah* ed. J. Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), p. 110. On the “calling of names” as an expression for understanding the link between phenomena in the lower world and their roots in the supernal world, see Roland Goetschel, *R. Meir Ibn Gabbai; Le Discours de la Kabbale espagnole* (Leuven, 1981), pp. 366–367, 416.
- 52 Genesis 2:19.
- 53 *She'elot le-Hakham*, (note 51 above), fols. 27b–28a. For the importance of the Adamic source of Kabbalah as centred on language see M. Idel, “Transmission of Kabbalah in the 13th Century” (forthcoming).
- 54 See M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), pp. 215–218.
- 55 Numbers 16:31.
- 56 *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* fol. 99a.
- 57 *Ma'amar 'al Penimiyyut ha-Torah*, printed by Gershom Scholem, in *Qiryat Sefer*, vol. 6 (1930), pp. 111–112. On this text see also Gottlieb, *Mehqarim* (note 51 above), pp. 128–131.
- 58 *Perush Sefer Yetzirah*, (Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 31d. On oral tradition as necessary for the understanding of the *Guide* see also *ibid.*, fol. 55c and Idel, “Transmission” (note 53 above), Appendix.
- 59 On this issue see Vajda, “Un Chapitre” (note 6 above), pp. 49–56, 130–133; Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, (SUNY, Albany, 1989), pp. 1–29.
- 60 See Abulafia’s *Ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*, printed by Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, Erstes Heft (Leipzig, 1853), pp. 18–19.
- 61 See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* (note 59 above), pp. 11–14.
- 62 *ibid.*, pp. 1–3.
- 63 Idel, *The Mystical Experience* (note 31 above), pp. 22–24.
- 64 Introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Ms. Mocow-Ginsburg, 133, fol. 20a.
- 65 I have preferred this translation to “strange”, because “wonderful” is closer to Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation, employed by Abulafia, *nifla'*.
- 66 The issue of prophetic parables.
- 67 Zechariah 11:7.
- 68 Song of Songs 2:15.

- 69 Zechariah 11:8.  
 70 *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, ch. 43; Pines, pp. 392–393.  
 71 Pines, *ibid.*, p. 418.  
 72 See *Hagigah* fol. 13ab.  
 73 Pines, pp. 429–430.  
 74 For more on this important topic in Jewish esotericism, see *Guide* III:5, Pines pp. 425–426.  
 75 See III:1, Pines, p. 417.  
 76 Ms. Munchen 408, fol. 30a.  
 77 *Philosophie und Kabbala* (note 46 above), p. 20.  
 78 *Guide* II:32, Pines, p. 369.  
 79 *Nefesh ha-Sekhel*.  
 80 *Mezuyyar ba-sekhel*. On the term *meziyyur* as forming a concept see H.A. Wolfson, “The Term *Taşawwur* and *Taşdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents”, *The Moslem World*, (April, 1943), pp. 1–15.  
 81 *ve-koah ha-medammeh*.  
 82 *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munchen 408, fol. 91ab.  
 83 *ibid.*, fol. 92a.  
 84 *ibid.*  
 85 See M. Idel, *R. Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrines* (Ph. D. Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 98–99 (Hebrew); *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, (note 36 above), p. 6.  
 86 *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 8; Idel, R. Abraham Abulafia, *ibid.*, pp. 86–87, 92–93, 96, 98–99, 103. I hope to elaborate elsewhere on the possible importance of this unique status of language as a form of cognition higher than imagination for later developments of the description of man as having the form of speech, as in Dante for example. See, for the time being, Umberto Eco, “*Forma Locutionis*” *Filosofia* '91 a cura di Gianni Vattimo, (Laterza, 1992), pp. 176–183.  
 87 See above, beside note 39, the quote from *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 115b.  
 88 *Sitrei Torah*, *ibid.*, fol. 118b. On the glossed Latin version of this statement, see Wirzubsky, *Between the Lines* (note 22 above), pp. 146–147.  
 89 *Darki 'ani*.  
 90 *Sitrei Sefer Yetzirah*.  
 91 Ms. Leipzig 39, fol. 5b. On the Latin, glossed version of this statement, see Wirzubsky, *Between the Lines*, (note 22 above), p. 143.  
 92 *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz* and a commentary printed by Yisrael Weinstock (Mosad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1984).  
 93 See Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah” (note 3 above), pp. 61–62.  
 94 *idem*, “The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* vol. I (1982),

- pp. 52–55 (Hebrew); on the Ashkenazi version of this view see Elliot Wolfson “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism” *JQR* vol. LXXXIV (1993), pp. 43–77.  
 95 Introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, ed. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1984), vol. I p. 6.  
 96 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fols. 118b–119a. *Uvekhof Eylu ha'inyanim vehaddomim lahem nistaru kol sodot hatorah hama'migim hamezi'ut be'emet vehem mamzi'im belev hamskilim hassgot el*.  
 97 See also *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah* (note 46 above), p. 20 and Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* pp. 46 and p. 171, note 80.  
 98 Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (note 5 above), pp. 387–388. On Nahmanides' reticence toward gematria and its significance see M. Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This” in I. Twersky, ed., *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1983), pp. 58–59.  
 99 Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, (note 59 above), pp. 95–101. In one of his later works, Abulafia is quite aware of the divergences between Nahmanides and Maimonides, and prefers Maimonides' view. See *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 53, fol. 179b.  
 100 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 210–218. On Abulafia's influence on this major Kabbalist see Abulafia himself, in an important autobiographical piece, analyzed *inter alia* in Idel, “Transmission”, (note 53 above), pp. 00; for the earlier literary career of Gikatilla, including in particular his contact with Abulafia see Gottlieb, *Mehqarim* (note 51 above), pp. 102–105 and for Gikatilla's thought see my introduction to *Gates of Light, Sha'arei 'Orah*, tr. A. Weinstein (Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), pp. XXVII–XXIX.  
 101 *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 211.  
 102 Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, (Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, Jerusalem, 1990), p. 101 (Hebrew).  
 103 On this issue see M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), pp. 45–145 as well as my introduction to Daniel Abrams ed., *The Book Bahir*, (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 1994), pp. 1–6. (Hebrew)  
 104 See par. VI above.  
 105 See the spurious epistle printed under the name *Megillat Setarim* in *Hemdah Genuzah*, ed., Z. Edelman (Koenigsburg, 1856), vol. I, p. 43. *Vehem khof-bet otivot peshuṭot verazah bo ki kol shebara' meruhaniyut hamala'khmi el hanefashot haḥizoniyot yehageagu be'elch hakhof-bet millot veyihyeh le'adam de'ah ba'olam*.  
 106 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 117a. In Hebrew *mahshavtenu*.  
 107 *ibid.* On the Latin version of this text, see Wirzubski, *Between the Lines* (note 22 above), p. 146. See also in his *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munchen 408, fol. 47a.

- 108 Hillel died in the nineties of the 13th century.
- 109 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 163b. See also Abulafia's epistle, *Matzref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fol. 33b, where a more clear statement about disclosing the headings of the chapters is found.
- 110 See *Hagigah*, fol. 13a.
- 111 *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedeq* ed., J.E. Porush (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 23.
- 112 On the whole issue see Raphael Jospe, "The Number and Division of Chapters in the Guide of the Perplexed", in M. Idel, W.Z. Harvey, E. Schweid, eds., *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1988), vol. I pp. 833–887 (Hebrew).
- 113 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 115b.
- 114 See Ravitzky, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom* (note 21 above), p. 212.
- 115 *Hidot*.
- 116 *Zurot*. This seems to be the best understanding of the text, and this meaning of the word is found in various medieval magical treatises. See e.g. the contemporaneous discussion of R. Abraham of Esquira in his *Sefer Yesod 'Olam*, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 607, fol. 179a (see on this author note 129 below), and the astro-magical text translated and discussed in Idel, "An Astral-Magical Pneumatic Anthropoid" *Incognita*, vol. II (1991), pp. 9–31.
- 117 *Ba'alei ha-Shemot*. Abulafia mentions this phrase in an explicit negative context: see his *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah, Philosophie und Kabbala* (note 46 above), p. 22. See also Maimonides' own negative attitude to the issue of amulets in the *Guide* I:61.
- 118 This book is also mentioned in Italy by Abraham Abulafia twice; see *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, *ibid.*, p. 21 as part of a list of older magical-mystical texts, and again, p. 2 where he quotes a gematria from this book as part of a tradition. I did not find this gematria in the various extant versions of this book. The second time he refers to divine names he learned from this book. It should however be mentioned that a book with this name had been quoted already by R. Abraham ibn Ezra in the 12th century and, in the 13th century, by R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen in Castile. See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* (note 59 above), p. 152; and, apparently also in this milieu, in a kabbalistic text attributed to R. Meshullam Tzarfati, Meshullam the Frenchman: Ms. Oxford 123, fols. 70b–71a; See Idel, *The Mystical Experience* (note 31 above), p. 105, Verman, *The Book of the Contemplation* (note 3 above), p. 205.
- 119 Namely things related to natural topics.
- 120 Printed by Raphael Kircheim, *Otzar Nehmad* vol. 2 (Wien, 1857), p. 133. See Idel, *R. Abraham Abulafia* (note 85 above), p. 40 note 28; Ravitzky, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, p. 155, "Secrets of the Guide" (note 41 above), p. 175, where a different translation of this text has been offered.

- 121 See e.g. Nahmanides' remark that Maimonides restricted the number of miracles and increased the scope of nature, found in his sermon "Torat ha-Shem Temimah", *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, Ch. D. Chavel, ed., (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1963), vol. I p. 154.
- 122 See Ravitzky, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, p. 154; "Secrets of the Guide" (note 41 above), p. 174.
- 123 See Idel, *R. Abraham Abulafia*, (note 85 above), pp. 129–133.
- 124 Printed in *Hemdah Genuzah*, (note 105 above).
- 125 See Aviezer Ravitzky's forthcoming study on Zerahiah and Barcelona.
- 126 *Hemdah Genuzah*, p. 45.
- 127 *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, pp. 154–155.
- 128 See the texts mentioned in the following notes.
- 129 See, e.g. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 340 note 60.
- 130 See Georges Vajda, *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, Philosophe Juif Marocain*, (Larose, Paris, 1954); Moshe Idel, "The Beginning of Kabbala in North Africa? — A Forgotten Document by R. Yehuda ben Nissim ibn Malka," *Pe'amim*, vol. 43 (1990), pp. 4–15 (Hebrew).
- 131 See Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance," *Essential Essays on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and baroque Italy*, ed., David Ruderman (New York University Press, New York, 1992), p. 155 note 68.
- 132 Ms. Moscow-Gunzburg 607, fol. 179a, 104a. On this author and his work see David de Gunzburg, "La Cabale a la veille de l'apparition du Zohar," *ha-Qedem*, vol. I (1907), pp. 28–36, 111–121; see especially p. 30.
- 133 "Mi-Hoqer li-Mequbbal," (note 5 above), pp. 92–93.
- 134 *ibid.*, p. 93; Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," p. 74 note 158.
- 135 Scholem, *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 136 See *Hilkhot Tefillin*, III:5.
- 137 See Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition," (note 98 above), pp. 51–73.
- 138 *ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*, (note 60 above), p. 18.
- 139 *idem*, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," p. 61.
- 140 On Abulafia's studies there see Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash III*, pp. XLII–XLIII; on Shem Tov's study with the Rashba see the several references spread all over his Kabbalistic extant writings.
- 141 Jellinek, *ibid.*, p. XLI.
- 142 *Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah*, (ed. Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 55cd.
- 143 See note 125 above.
- 144 See Ibn Adret's responsum, vol. I, no. 548.
- 145 See R. Yehudah Hayyat, *Sefer Minhat Yehudah*, printed in *Sefer Ma'areket ha-'Elohut* (Mantua, 1558), fol. 3b. On the background of this critique see M. Idel, "The Encounters between the Spanish and Italian Kabbalah after the Expulsion from Spain" (forthcoming).